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'HE'S MADE FOR THESE KINDS OF GAMES': XANDER BOGAERTS ARRIVES ON BIG STAGE

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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- A year ago, it would have been unfathomable to think of Xander Bogaerts negotiating the walk that Rays manager [Joe Maddon](#) proclaimed the "tipping point" in Game 4 of the [American League](#) Division Series.

Xander Bogaerts scores a run in the ninth inning of Tuesday's 3-1 victory over the Rays. (AP)

That fact was not merely a reflection of the fact that Bogaerts spent the year in High-A with a brief end-of-season exposure to Double-A. Instead, it represented an aspect of Bogaerts' game that had not yet matured: patience. Put another way: Bogaerts didn't walk.

That's not quite true. Bogaerts did walk in Double-A ... once. In 97 plate appearances. That wasn't a red flag. He was so young while performing at that level that the Sox expected that he could improve the skill over time. But to imagine that he would progress to the point

where his patience and plate discipline could lead, just one year later, to the game-deciding runs in the [Red Sox](#)' 3-1 victory over the Rays in Game 4 of the ALDS that concluded a 3-1 Sox series victory? Nearly impossible.

"You see guys talk about wanting to improve that skill, but God, that's a hard thing to do," [Red Sox](#) assistant general manager Mike Hazen said. "He made a huge effort this year to improve that skill, and I've never really seen a player do that, to improve that skill to that level. We've had guys who have that skill who improved, but nobody who, like last year in Double-A where he walked one time, came into a season, said I'm going to work on it and did it."

Indeed, Bogaerts used the offseason to reflect on the successes of his 2012 season, when he became the first [Red Sox](#) teenager to blast 20 homers in a season at any level since Tony Conigliaro nearly half a century earlier. He'd made progress in virtually every aspect of his game -- his defense, his ability to recognize pitches to drive, his overall maturity -- but he made the determination that, to take his game to the next level, to progress through the upper levels and to the big leagues, he had work to do.

"Last year, after the season, I wanted to get more walks. Don't swing at bad pitches," Bogaerts recalled, in between dousings in the Sox' clubhouse celebration. "If the pitcher's going to give you a walk, you might as well take it."

He did more than just talk the talk.

Bogaerts, as Hazen suggested, applied himself to master his command of the strike zone, and on Tuesday, his newfound talent for doing just that proved a game-changer. The Rays led 1-0 in the top of the seventh inning when Bogaerts got his opportunity. That Xander Bogaerts was batting at all came as a surprise, if not a shock.



After all, just one day earlier, with Rays reliever Jake McGee on the mound in the seventh inning, [Red Sox](#) manager [John Farrell](#) had stuck with [Stephen Drew](#) against the hard-throwing left-hander, suggesting that as a fastball-only pitcher, his handedness didn't matter. And even on Tuesday, just a couple of hours before the game, [Farrell continued to articulate the "sound reasoning"](#) of sticking with Drew in such a situation, while also noting that Bogaerts remained an unknown quantity. So, when Bogaerts replaced Drew, it represented a reversal by Farrell, as the manager acknowledged after the fact.

"Last night did play into it. I'll be honest to you. If I told you it wasn't I'd be lying to you. You look at how guys are responding to certain situations. McGee is a hell of a reliever," Farrell recounted. "I reserve the right to change my mind. And given some of the struggles that Stephen has had, you know, we had talked about this leading into the series, and I felt like at the moment as tough as left-handers have been on Stephen, I felt like we had to try something different."

Maddon was surprised by the move. He noted after the game that the Sox "had not pinch-hit for Drew at all." But the struggles had reached a critical point, with the Sox' primary shortstop not having walked against a left-handed pitcher since Aug. 27.

Bogaerts, like Drew on Monday, saw nothing but fastballs from McGee. Indeed, Bogaerts had been paying attention, and he knew that he would get nothing but fastballs. And so, he took a called strike and a ball, then swung through a 96 mph offering to fall behind 1-2. But instead of becoming overanxious, Bogaerts waited for McGee to come into the zone with another strike.

It didn't happen. Bogaerts laid off three straight fastballs to earn his spot on first base.

Walks tend not to capture the attention of a viewing audience. The mere word -- "walk" -- imply a muted nature of the action. Yet for those who have been around the game, there is something remarkable about the ability to remain patient enough to ignore temptation beyond the parameters of the strike zone, to stay disciplined enough to force a pitcher to work in the strike zone. In Bogaerts' case, the accomplishment was amplified by both his age (he turned 21 on Oct. 1) and the infrequency of his playing opportunities.

"For a young guy that's been sitting for quite a while, obviously he showed tremendous poise and almost ice in his veins," said Farrell. "The way Bogey came off the bench to work out the walk, he gets a fastball thrown by him and he doesn't expand the zone. He doesn't chase. He's patient and he's very much under control emotionally inside a given game. And [it] proved out to be a pivotal moment with his at-bat."

Indeed, Bogaerts' walk kickstarted the Sox' game-winning rally. He advanced to third with two outs on Jacoby Ellsbury's single, then sprinted home on a wild pitch, getting an excellent read on a pitch that squirted away from catcher Jose Lobaton, with Ellsbury racing to third on the wild pitch and then scoring on Shane Victorino's infield single.

"The tipping point might have been the walk to Bogaerts," rued Maddon. "They throw him up, he had a 1-2 count, we walk him. And that's pretty much how that whole thing began to roll."

Bogaerts had been given notice about an inning before his pinch-hitting opportunity that he might enter the game -- either as a pinch-hitter or pinch-runner -- and so he had a chance to wrap his head around the opportunity. Still, he acknowledged feeling antsy, perhaps even anxious on the bench. But that changed in the batter's box, not just in his first at-bat, but then again in the ninth when he worked another walk, this time against Rays closer [Fernando Rodney](#). Bogaerts ignored the pitcher's three changeups en route to yet another six-pitch walk and yet another run.

The outcome was anything but an accident.

"Against Rodney especially, I was going there, taking the first pitch to try to wear him out for other guys," said Bogaerts. "I saw yesterday where he gave a couple of walks, the walk to [Will] Middlebrooks. He was really wild. I was trying not to be overaggressive with him."

Mission accomplished. Game changed.

Bogaerts became just the eighth player ever to walk twice at the age of 21 or younger in a postseason game. His predecessors in that regard include some dazzling names: [Justin Upton](#) (the last to do it in 2007), [Andruw Jones](#), [Edgar Renteria](#), Wayne Garrett, [Mickey Mantle](#), Stan Musial and Dib Williams. That group suggests that players with the ability to avoid being swallowed by the speed of the game at such a young age have a chance to go on and accomplish remarkable things.

He had the pivotal at-bats of the game. And he is 21 -- barely. Bogaerts reached legal drinking age in the U.S. last week, though he chose not to exercise his newly acquired rights during his team's revelry. ("I can drink but I won't drink," he said. "I'm legal, but I won't.")

It is hard for Bogaerts to fathom what he is doing. But his teammates and those around the Sox have a better sense that they are bearing witness to something extraordinary, something that they have rarely seen before and might not see that often again.

"I wasn't making diving plays in the hole [as a 21-year-old]," mused reliever [Craig Breslow](#). "I wasn't having at-bats against Rodney in the ninth inning of a postseason. Two great at-bats, incredible poise. He's just a great kid, eager to learn, works hard, and I think he's going to be really good."

Once again, this was a tantalizing hint of what is to come. Bogaerts is a player who, having just turned 21, is capable of impacting a game in a role where even veterans sometimes struggle, coming off the bench to hit in a real game for the first time in nine days -- to the point where extremely surprising outcomes come across as almost unsurprising.

"I expected nothing different than what happened," said Brandon Workman, who has been Bogaerts' teammate for nearly every game that the young infielder has played in the States. "He put together two good ABs. The first one, he got two strikes on him really quick and worked to get a walk. The second one was a little easier. But I really expect nothing different from him. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd hit a home run right there."

"His composure, everything about him, his demeanor at the plate, he's a lot older than 21. You wouldn't expect that from a 21-year-old in this environment -- taking pitches, doing that, working ABs -- but I honestly wouldn't expect anything else from him."

Indeed, Bogaerts looked more than ready for the opportunity that awaited him -- and, in turn, for what awaits him beyond the immediate present. When he next plays remains an open question. But the next time that the Sox summon him, it appears likely that this extraordinary prospect will indeed be ready.

"It's not that easy, especially when you don't play. But he went out there, looked real comfortable, patient -- it looked like he was slowing the game down. I was proud of him," said Sox assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez, who has worked with Bogaerts since the Sox signed him. "He showed that he's made for these kinds of games. I'm looking forward to being here to watch him play."